Choosing Great Dances

Rick Mohr, August 2013

One of my core goals as a caller is to **call only great dances**. Why ever call a mediocre dance if there's a better one out there? Really.

That means **collecting actively** to have good choices, but the real secret is **evaluating ruthlessly** to keep only the best ones.

How often do you find yourself dancing a dance which seems completely predictable or has a place that just doesn't work well, and wonder to yourself "Why didn't the caller choose a better dance?" For me that happens pretty often.

To avoid that situation as callers we need to get good at distinguishing great dances from mediocre dances. I have two suggestions in that regard—choosing **distinctive** dances, and weeding out dances with **negative qualities**.

Choose distinctive dances

A dance can be distinctive for any number of reasons, including a great figure, a great sequence, great flow, or a different formation. We want dancers to say "Wow, that was a great dance!" after every single dance. Making sure each dance has standout features goes a long way.

Note that "distinctive" doesn't necessarily mean "challenging"—some of the most useful dances in my box have a distinctive feature which appeals to regulars while remaining accessible to beginners.

There are only a few situations where I think a non-distinctive dance is best:

- For the first dance or two, to warm up the dancers and integrate beginners
- At the end of the first and second half, when a "cruiser" is usually best
- If something bombs and the dancers need an enjoyable confidence-builder

In all other situations I try to make sure each dance stands out in some way before I choose it. (And of course the non-distinctive dances still have to be good!)

Evaluate pluses and minuses

Another key approach to choosing great dances is to get a clear idea of the important positive and negative qualities a contra dance can have, and then carefully apply those criteria to your dances. Scour them for pluses and minuses, and reject the ones that don't measure up.

You'll have your own ideas of dance pluses and minuses; here are some of mine.

Minuses:

- Awkward transitions
- Too much time for a figure
- Not enough time for a figure
- Too confusing
- Too busy
- Too cliché (predictable)
- Too clockwise
- Significantly unequal for 1s and 2s
- Swing shorter than 8 counts
- Swing longer than 12 counts
- Swing ends mid-phrase
- Bad end effects
- Partner too long in another minor set

Pluses:

- Smooth transitions
- Distinctive figure or sequence
- Equal action for 1s and 2s
- Neighbor swing
- Forgiving (has a "catch up" point)
- Symmetrical choreography
- Balance sequence in A parts or B parts

Could be a plus or minus:

- Continuous motion / never get to rest
- Women/men get lots of action
- Double progression
- Needs extra space up and down

(Note that some of these aren't absolute—a quality that makes a dance bad in one situation may make it good in another.)

Take some time to consider each dance in your collection. Is it distinctive, or good for beginners, or a cruiser? If not, put it aside. How many minuses does it have? No, really? Pay close attention when calling it, dancing it, or inspecting the card. Hmm, I never really noticed but this transition is kind of awkward. Hmm, I never really noticed but this dance is completely clockwise for the women. Hmm, I never really noticed but this dance is so full of cool figures that it's just too busy. Hmm, I never really noticed but this dance has the exact same predictable sequences as lots of other dances.

If a dance turns out to have problems, you might be able to fix it; otherwise, put it aside.

While a dance can clearly survive some minuses, the ones that spread don't have them.

If you keep at it you'll have plenty of great dances to choose from and your repertoire will start zinging.